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An Exploratory Study of the Association between the Big-Five Personality Dimensions, the Use of Influencing Behaviors with Military Staff Members' Perceived Performance

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ABSTRACT

The purpose was to explore the association between the Big Five personality dimensions, the use of influencing behaviors (influencing tactics and political skill) with military staff members' perceived performance. The sample included 185 Armed Forces staff members from various countries (predominantly the Baltic countries, Sweden, Norway and the USA). A hierarchical multiple regression indicated that the Big-Five Dimensions Extraversion and Openness made statistically significant contributions (albeit low) in step 1 of the regression analysis in relation to performance, however, their contribution was weakened after the influencing behaviors were added in step 2 of the analysis. Two influencing behaviors (influencing tactic Rational persuasion and Political skill) demonstrated to be unique statistically significant contributions to perceived performance in the model as a whole, with political skill being the strongest. Practical considerations and future research directions are suggested.

Keywords:
Personality, Influencing Behavior, Political Skill, Military, Performance

Introduction

Performance is a constant focus for organizations, both for private and government sectors. The military is no exception, especially when an individual's performance can be linked to the life and limb of oneself or others in dangerous contexts. Therefore, both team and individuals' performance is examined, scrutinized and continuously developed in order to increase overall staff effectivity. Hard

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factors such as routines, training exercises and procedures have traditionally been focused upon for military performance development. However, an increased interest on soft factors such as leadership styles, interpersonal skills, social effectivity and personality has become increasingly important (Blass & Ferris, 2007; Laker & Powell, 2011; Ohlsson et al., 2016).

Globalization of working life means that many organizations are increasingly being manned by people from various countries with the expectation of inter-organization collaboration to promote organization performance (Burke & Cooper, 2004; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). The military is of no exception and one of the characteristics of modern peacekeeping missions includes the multinational composition of higher level military staffs. This has been the case in the last few decades in many operations headed by the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Acting in an allied fashion has obvious political and economic advantages. However, at the same time, it also presents different challenges when attempting to coordinate different competencies, cultures and praxis patterns in highly stressful conditions (Larsson et al., 2016).

Traditionally speaking, military organizations often have a reputation of being bureaucratic in nature, which are organized through rank and hierarchy (Alvinius et al., 2014; Andrzejewski, 1954; Jamali et al., 2006). Higher level military staffs, however, have a more unique composition in comparison to this traditional set-up. Hittle and DeWitt (2012) note that higher-level staffs are comprised of smaller teams which include staff members that encompass specialty skill-sets in order to reach greater results than one individual could do on their own. In addition, the group members as well as the leaders have different goals they need to fulfill which may require varying influencing strategies in order to leverage a decision making process the best way they perceive possible. Naturally, group leaders have the authority in a group to use hard influences using direct orders downward toward subordinates. On the contrary, group members may need to exert more soft influencing techniques in order to persuade other, both laterally with other team members and upwards towards leaders for goal acquisition.

Theoretical foundations

Hogan and Shelton (1998) propose that an individual's personality alone cannot instigate interpersonal influence. They claim that personality combined with social skills is what determines success in influencing others. According to trait activation theory, an individual's ability for social influence processes is only possible to the extent that the environment allows (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Thus, the success of influence is more dependent of a combination of several factors rather than one alone.

Trait Influencers. An increased confidence of measuring personality with was gained in the 1990's as the five-factor model of personality was created and determined to be a robust measure of personality (Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1993; John, 1990). The Big Five was later adopted for recruitment and selection in varying occupations (Barrick & Mount, 1991) and is widely used in combination with other variables of interest as predictors of performance in many contexts (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Blickle et al., 2008). The Big Five dimensions (described from the positive pole), include: (a) extraversion (e.g., sociable, talkative and assertive), (b) agreeableness (e.g., good-natured, cooperative and trusting), (c) conscientiousness (e.g., responsible, dependable, persistent and achievement oriented), (d) (low) neuroticism (e.g., emotionally stable, calm, ability to handle stress), and (e) openness (e.g., imaginative, artistically sensitive, and intellectual) (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000; John & Srivastava, 1999; Thoresen et al., 2003). Several studies have linked certain personality dimensions with higher levels of performance across most job occupations, namely conscientiousness (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Hurtz & Donovan, 2000) and low neuroticism (also referred to as emotional stability) (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000; Ohlsson et al., 2016). However, researchers highlight the importance of studying personality in various career fields and contexts as they argue that performance may relate differently to personality dimensions (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000).

Positive correlations between political skill and the Big Five personality dimensions have been found, namely extraversion ($r = .28$, $p < .01$) and conscientiousness ($r = .25$, $p < .01$) in a civilian context (Ferris et al., 1999). In a military staff setting, the relationship between personality dimensions, political skill and team performance was examined and the results indicated that low neuroticism and political skill were statistically significant, yet limited predictors of team performance (Ohlsson et al., 2016). However, this study focused on team performance and gave no insight to contributors of individual's perceived performance in a military context.

Behavior Influencers. One way of studying influencing behavior is through individuals' influencing tactics. There are many taxonomies and definitions of influencing tactics in organizational studies; however, the tactics described by Kipnis, Schmidt and Wilkinson (1980) and Yukl and Falbe (1990) are the definitions most generally referred to in the literature (Wayne, Liden, Graf & Ferris, 2006). In some studies, the tactics have been divided into categories referred to as either hard or soft depending on the type of influencing tactic used. Hard influencing tactics are relatively controlling and coercive in nature and are based upon power authorities (Cialdine & Goldstein, 2004). Tactics that are considered to fall into this category include coercion, coalition and pressure tactics (Falbe & Yukl, 1992). On the contrary, soft influencing tactics, entice a target to freely conform to the influencing behavior include: upward appeal, ingratiation tactic, rational persuasion, inspiration appeal and consultation tactics (Yukl et al., 1993; van Knippenberg & Steensma, 2003; Madigan et al., 2020), which are described below based on Yukl and Falbe's (Yukl & Falbe, 1990) definitions:

Table 1.

Soft influencing tactics:

Upward Appeal	Seeking to persuade someone that the request is approved by higher management for assistance in gaining their compliance with the request.
Ingratiation tactic	An attempt get someone in a good mood or to think favorably of you before asking them to do something.
Rational persuasion	The use of logical arguments and factual evidence to persuade someone that a proposal or request is viable and likely to result in the attainment of task objectives.
Inspirational appeal	An emotional request of a proposal that arouses enthusiasm by appealing to someone's values and ideals, or by increasing their confidence that they can do it.
Consultation tactic	Seeking participation from someone in making a decision or planning how to implement a proposed strategy or change.

Yet another way to investigate influencing behavior is through individuals' social effectiveness ability. Social effectiveness is described as individuals' moderately stable, social abilities that influence the affective and behavioral reactions of others in a goal-oriented fashion, without the use of coercion or force (Semadar et al., 2006). The Political Skill Inventory (PSI) was developed to measure an individual's social effectiveness in the work place, which includes four distinct social interaction dimensions: networking ability, apparent sincerity, social astuteness, and interpersonal influence (Ferris et al., 2005). However, political skill is often measured through a total score representing an overall ability to use political skill as an influencing behavior (Blickle et al., 2008; Shi et al., 2013). Although political skill may seem similar to social skill, it is pointed out that the distinction lies in political skill's ability to go beyond the basic parameters of the competency in communication, ease and comfort that social skill entails to an individual managing his/her interactions with others in a way that leads to organizational goal accomplishment (Blass & Ferris, 2007; Perrewé et al., 2002).

Specific to performance, political skill has been demonstrated as a robust predictor of work outcomes, including job performance (Kimura, 2015; Semador et al., 2006). It has, however, been pointed out that the use of political skill in varying job contexts is important to study further in order to gain a better understanding of it (Blickle et al., 2008; Ferris et al., 2002). Specifically, the military organization is generally driven from well organized, distinct power sources arranged through overt

hierarchy. However, it has been shown that soft influencing tactics, through the use of political skill is also active within military organizations (Ohlsson et al., 2016; Ohlsson et al., 2022).

To our knowledge, individual's trait influencers (personality dimensions) in combination with patterns of influencing behaviors, including soft influencing behaviors and political skill, have not been combined for analysis on individual's perceived performance in a military setting. Drawing on the limited previous research found in varying organizational contexts our research aimed to examine the relationships between individuals' personality dimensions, soft influencing tactics and political skill as well as how these sets of conditions are associated with individual's perceived staff performance in a military context.

Method

Participants

The study employed a cross-sectional research design. Study participants were military staff officers and military student officers from several defence universities (primarily European), including various organizational levels (different ranks and positions) participating in an annual multinational military staff exercise that was run by the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) and the Swedish Defence University (SEDU). The purpose of the training event was aimed to train military officers to effectively perform collaborative staff work with several military organizations to increase their understanding of using standard operating procedures within a NATO led operation. Of the 230 requested participants, 185 volunteered their participation, yielding an 80% response rate. The sample included 45 from the Baltic Defence College, 61 from the Norwegian Defence College, 45 from the Swedish Defence University, 25 from the US Air Force Academy, and seven participants that identified themselves as "other." The majority of participants (n = 167; 90%) were men. Nearly half (86, 46.2%) were in the Army, 40 were in the Navy (21.5%), 47 were in the Air Force (25.3%), and 12 classified themselves as Coast Guard or Special Forces (6.5%). After removing two outliers the effective sample size was 183.

Ethics

All participants were treated in accordance with human research principles formulated by the Swedish Research Council (2017) and in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration. All participants were informed of their rights, including detailed written information about the aims of the study, the intention of the use of the data (for research purposes) and how the data would be stored. Participation was voluntary, participants provided written informed consent before taking part in the study and data was collected anonymously. Data were collected and stored in registers with the Swedish Defence University. The study procedures, collection, storing and distribution of the data were performed in accordance to current general data protection regulations.

Measures

Given that the sample group was multinational with English as the working language, the scales were given in their native form, English.

Personal variables. These included the following demographic factors: gender, age, formal education, military service, military rank, serving country, years of service and military position.

Personality. This was measured through the Big Five Inventory (BFI) (John & Srivastava, 1999), which is a 44-item inventory that measures an individual on the Big Five Factors (dimensions) of personality (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness). The scale is measure on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 representing the lowest (strongly disagree) and 5 the highest (strongly agree). The scale's validity is well-established (John & Srivastava, 1999). In the present study, the Cronbach alphas were .82, .72, .76, .77 and .80, respectively.

Soft influencing tactics. This was measured through self-made single items based on Yukl and Falbe's (1990) definitions of five soft influencing tactics. These included: upward appeals, ingratiation,

rational persuasion, inspirational and consultation tactics. The participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale regarding how often they used these types of tactics on their nearest boss (upward influence). A score of 1 represented never using the tactic and a score of 5 represented using the tactic very often (almost every week) under normal working conditions.

Political skill. This was measured through the Political Skill Inventory (PSI) (Ferris et al., 2005) which is comprised of 18 items. Participants responded to on a 7-point Likert scale, 1 representing the lowest (strongly disagree) and 7 the highest (strongly agree) on how often they participated in various influencing behavior at the work place. Political skill includes four dimensions: (1) networking ability, (2) apparent sincerity, (3) social astuteness, and (4) interpersonal influence. The scale also offers a total score reflecting an individual's political skill ability and is often operationalized as so in the literature (e.g., Blickle et al., 2008; Huang et al., 2013; Shi et al., 2013). Our analysis used the total scale score, which had a Cronbach alpha of .83.

Perceived performance. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale question rating the performance perception of oneself in their role. A score of 1 represented the lowest quality of performance and 5 the highest quality of performance. This was measured through the following question: (1) How would you rate the quality of your own performance of your job responsibilities in general staff work?

Data analyses

Reliability, descriptive and correlation analyses were performed. In addition, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess associations between the significant associated variables (bivariate correlations) of personality, influencing tactics towards others and the use of political skill in the work place on individual's perceived military staff performance. Statistical significance was assumed at $p < .05$. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 23 (IBM Corporation, 2015).

Results

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations

Table 2 reports the means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of the study variables. Beginning with the means, the table shows that several of the scales are fairly well-centered around the scale or dimension's midpoint. However, several scales and/or scale dimensions were somewhat positively skewed, BFI: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness, Soft influencing tactics: rational persuasion, consultation tactic, and PSI overall score, while others were slightly negatively skewed, Influencing tactics (upward appeal and ingratiation tactic).

Table 2.

Intercorrelations, means and standard deviations of big-five personality dimensions, soft influencing tactics, political skill total score and perceived performance (n = 183)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	*M*	*SD*
1. Extraversion [a]	-											3.48	.63
2. Agreeableness [a]	.12	-										3.93	.47
3.Conscientiousness [a]	.29**	.37**	-									3.97	.49
4. Openness [a]	.35**	-.00	.14	-								3.46	.55
5. Neuroticism [a]	-.19*	.26**	.42**	-.09	-							2.17	.53
6. Upward appeal [a]	.04	-.10	-.03	-.08	.05	-						2.14	1.14
7. Ingratiation tactic [a]	.07	-.06	.04	-.06	.07	.19*	-					2.11	1.14
8. Rational persuasion [a]	.11	.03	.10	.11	-.13	.07	.07	-				4.04	.94
9. Inspiration appeal [a]	.15	.00	.11	.10	-.06	.04	.18*	.26**	-			2.82	1.27
10. Consultation tactic [a]	.09	.15*	.10	.10	-.08	.07	.11	.23**	.43**	-		3.27	1.24
11. Political skill total score [b]	.59**	.15*	.26**	.38**	-.17*	.04	.12	.03	.23	.19*	-	5.05	.84
12. Perceived perform [a]	.31**	.02	.27**	.25**	-.18*	.03	-.01	.26**	.20**	.18*	.42**	3.99	.58

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$

a Scale scores could range from 1 (lowest degree) to 5 (highest degree).

b Scale scores could range from 1 (least favorable) to 7 (most favorable).

Starting with the Big-Five personality dimensions, extraversion, conscientiousness, openness and low neuroticism showed statistically significant correlations with individual's perceived performance. Moving to soft influencing tactics, statistically significant correlations were found between the tactics of rational persuasion, inspiration appeal and consultation tactics respectively and with individual's perceived performance. Lastly, the total political skill score was found to be statically significantly correlated with individual's perceived performance.

Regression analyses

A hierarchical multiple linear regression was performed to assess prediction potential between the variables that were found to be statistically significantly correlated with perceived performance. Perceived performance was designated as the dependent variable for the analysis. In step 1, extraversion, conscientiousness, openness and neuroticism were designated as the predictor variables. In step 2, the influencing behaviors of rational persuasion, inspirational appeal and consultation tactics as well as the political skill inventory total score were entered as predictor variables. The results are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3.

Regression results for the association of Big-Five personality dimensions (Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Emotional stability and Openness), Soft influencing tactics (Rational persuasion, Inspirational appeal and Consultation tactic) and Political Skill with perceived performance (n = 183)

	Step 1			Final Model		
Predictor Variables	Beta	t	p	Beta	t	p
Extraversion	.24	2.92	.00	.05	.57	.57
Conscientiousness	.12	1.47	.14	.09	1.14	.26
Neuroticism	-.04	-.54	.59	-.02	-.23	.82
Openness	.16	1.99	.05	.08	1.03	.31
Rational persuasion				.21	2.86	.01
Inspirational appeal				.05	.67	.51
Consultation tactic				.02	.31	.76
Political skill				.34	3.83	.00
R^2/Adjusted R^2	.161/.1407.578**			.281/.2437.512**		
F change in R^2						

* Dependent variable: Perceived performance

Looking first at the predictive power of the personality dimensions with perceived performance in step 1, model 1 explained 14% of the variance, ($F(4,158) = 7.58$, $p < .001$), thus indicating that the personality dimensions of extraversion, conscientiousness, openness and (low) neuroticism accounted for a limited, yet statistically significant proportion of the variance in the outcome of individuals' perceived performance. Specifically, extraversion and openness made statistically significant contributions in step 1 of the regression analysis. In Step 2, the addition of influencing behaviors were added (use of rational persuasion, consultation tactics and inspirational appeal towards others) and the political skill total score, the model as a whole explained 24% of the variance ($F(8, 154) = 7.51$, $p < .001$). Although two personality dimensions (extraversion and openness) made significant contributions to the model in step 1, after adding individuals' influencing behaviors in Step 2, only two individual predictor variables (political skill and rational persuasion) made unique statistically significant contributions on individuals' perceived performance in the model as a whole. Moreover, by adding the soft influencing tactics and political skill variables into the model equation, the model variance increased by 10%, improving the model result.

Discussion

Drawing on the limited previous research found in varying organizational contexts our research aimed to examine the relationships between individuals' personality dimensions, individuals' influencing behavior patterns (including influencing tactics and political skill) as well as how these sets of conditions are associated with individuals' perceived staff performance in a military context.

The findings indicated that a few of the variables of interest were found to be predictors of individuals' perceived performance, yet not all of them. Regarding personality, the Big-Five personality dimensions extraversion, conscientiousness, (low) neuroticism and openness indicated limited, yet, significant impact on the proportion of variance in individuals' perceived performance. Thus, the findings give further confirmation of the association of conscientiousness and low neuroticism (emotional stability), which have previously been associated with performance across varying occupational groups (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Hurtz & Donovan, 2000). This study contributes by giving a better understanding of other Big-Five personality dimensions that may improve performance in an international military setting, namely extraversion and openness. Extraversion was previously found to be associated with the political skill, which in turn was associated with team performance in a military staff work (Ohlsson et al., 2016). This study indicates that it is also positively associated with self-rated individual performance ratings. Openness was a new found association with performance and

could be of interest in further research given that military staff work in specialty teams and need to be cognitively flexible to the opposing ideas of other team members to reach collective goals.

Three of the five soft influencing tactics described by Yukl and Falbe's (1990) were found to be associated with performance (use of rational persuasion, consultation tactics and inspirational appeal). However, two of the influencing tactics (ingratiation tactics and upwards appeal) were not found to be associated with performance. Political skill was associated with individuals' perceived performance, and in fact, was the strongest correlated variable.

Although extraversion and openness were found to be positively associated with performance in step 1 of the regression analysis, their associations were weakened as predictor variables when the influencing tactics and political skill were designated as predictor variables in step 2. Thus, the only significant unique predictor variables of individuals' perceived performance found were rational persuasion and political skill, with political skill being the strongest predictor variable of the two.
The use of rational persuasion (through the use of logical arguments and factual evidence) towards others was indicated to be an important influencing behavior in the military context.

Although this is classified as a soft tactic, this result is not surprising as military staff teams often work individually and in small groups with their area of expertise which they later present to the chief of staff and his/her advisors for approval. Rational persuasion is regularly used as a technique in the formal decision making process. Future research could focus on what types of influencing techniques are used in informal situations.

In the current study, the use of political skill demonstrated to be an important behavior pattern in relation to individuals' perceived performance; even in a hierarchical organization, such as the military. This is important as it indicates the value of interpersonal skills and influence in modern military operations, which include increased expectations of collaborative work in order to promote organization performance (Burke & Cooper, 2004; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). This could also be an interesting topic to research further, especially if one was able to measure objective performance indicators rather than subjective self-ratings, as was used in the current study.

Despite the study's contributions, there are several limitations that should be recognized. The first weakness being that the study relied on self-reported data. The benefit of using self-reports are that they are considered a good way to measure the individual's internal states, including attitudes, emotions, perceptions, and values (Podsakoff et al., 2012; Spector, 2006). However, it has also been argued that individuals may not be able to accurately report on the objective environment, giving their reports a subjective undertone (Spector, 2006). Specifically, there is a risk of social desirability bias, which refers to an individual's desire to be viewed positively by others. This may results in an individual presenting oneself favorably regardless of the true position of the construct being measured (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964; Podsakoff et al., 2003; Spector, 2006).

Second, the soft influencing tactics and individual performance were measured through single-item measures. It is preferable in research to use validated multiple-item scales instead of single-items, when possible (Gilbert & Kelloway, 2014). In the current study the questionnaire was formulated to be short and concise in order reduce drop-out rates. However, the use of single-item measures does not necessarily have to compromise the validity of the construct as long as the question is straight forward and specific in its content (Gilbert & Kelloway, 2014; Wanous et al., 1997), which was the case with the utilized single-item questions. However, more robust measures may have indicated different results or captured different nuances of performance that were not captured here. This includes further delineation of performance into categories such as task performance (measuring tasks that contribute to the organizations technical core), contextual performance (tasks that shape the organizational, social and psychological context in which task performance occurs) (Johnson, 2001). Lastly, the questionnaires were given in their native form, English, to multinational staff workers, therefore there may have been language barriers interpreting and responding to the questions.

The study's findings have practical considerations for military educational settings, by showing the possible benefit of adding rational persuasion techniques and political skill within educational settings for further performance improvements in collaborative environments, both nationally and internationally. Given that military staffs work in team settings with collective goals and specialization competencies, individuals' ability to influence others in order to reach goals is an important skill to have. The connection of specific personality dimensions associated with military staff performance may help with military staff recruitment and the ability to train individuals in political skill may help military staff workers in their daily work tasks.

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